ideas
original perspectives on life and business from leading thinkers

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“Innovation begins with an attitude and a willingness to embrace the unknown. And when you focus on making your ideas happen, you start to become an intrapreneur.”

Closely resembling entrepreneurs, we call the people who turn ideas into realities within an organisation ‘intrapreneurs’ – they are the hands-on ‘doers’ who make new ideas happen. They roll up their sleeves to get things done and recruit others to assist them. They are the dreamers who do – either building on someone else’s ideas or creating their own.
INTRAPRENEURS – THE DREAMERS WHO DO

entrepreneurs

INTRAPRENEURS

employees
I began my career in the automotive industry in 1992. When I left business college I took up a position as receptionist with York Motors where I began my first database. I used index cards to record special notes that would make it easier for me to reconnect with people the next time we met. Fourteen years later, many of the people from that card database are among my closest friends and clients, and they continue to refer enormous amounts of business to me.

Throughout my selling years, I always treated my career as ‘a business within a business’. Although not a proprietary limited company, I spent these years establishing myself as a business entity working within Mercedes-Benz. From the beginning, I set course on a long-term strategy to gain and maintain loyal customers and referrals by understanding and serving people’s specific wants and needs. While I was part of a larger sales consultancy team, I focused solely on my ever-growing database of clients, and eventually 100 per cent of my business was coming from repeats and referrals within this network. I personally invested thousands of dollars each year creating and managing a personalised VIP customer club for these clients. This is how I became known as an intrapreneur within the global Mercedes-Benz organisation.

This intrapreneurial business model was drawn to the attention of Mercedes-Benz, where sales staff are encouraged to treat everything they do as if it were their own business – to tear up the list of excuses and take personal responsibility for their actions, acting with integrity and candour in everything they do and keeping the company’s best interests at the forefront of their thinking.

EMPLOYEE VS ENTREPRENEUR VS INTRAPRENEUR

In business today, there are three options for staff in organisations:

- Do you want to be an employee, going along in your day-to-day life, content with the security of having a job and not really wanting to rock the boat along the way? Many people are happy to fit into this mould of employee.
- Would you prefer to not have to answer to anyone but yourself? Do you have the courage to go out on your own and to take the risk of starting a new business? These people are the world’s entrepreneurs.
- Do you strive for something in between – not content to be an employee, but not prepared for entrepreneurship? Are you courageous, prepared to be a moderate risk-taker, flexible, creative and determined to get results within the construct of an existing organisation? This is the path of the intrapreneur.

Sometimes, employees are given the opportunity to transform their roles into intrapreneurial ones. If you are offered such an opportunity you may have the chance to take your career to new heights by helping to drive the future of your company. Whether you are asked to develop a product, service, channel or application, will you make your mark or seal your fate? Should you:

A. Seize the moment?

B. Pass on the opportunity and remain an employee, or leave to become an entrepreneur?

When to seize the moment – you should go for it when:

- Other employees do not feel empowered to make the needed changes, but you do.
- Other employees do not connect the quality or quantity of their work to the success of your company or an increase in their pay, but you do.
- No one in your company, including your sales team, has ever really had to sell an idea, product or service in order to make a mortgage payment, but you have.
- You see your organisation as just ‘going along to get along’, but you can’t.
When to pass on the opportunity – you should pass and perhaps leave to become an entrepreneur when:

- Your owners are motivated more by protecting their wealth than they are by creating new value for internal and external customers.
- Your owners are threatened, weak and don’t really want to change.
- There are insiders protecting the status quo that control your organisation.
- The pain of your organisation changing is greater than the pain of it not changing.

Every effective worker has intrapreneurial traits that may or may not culminate in an entrepreneurial life. Ask yourself how close you are to becoming an entrepreneur. Your answer will help you to decide whether you should seize the moment or pass on the opportunity!

INTRAPRENEURS LEAD NEW BUSINESS GROWTH

When a company is under pressure to grow, organisations of all types look to their roots and their previous successes for answers. Rekindling business growth is often the toughest challenge for a maturing organisation. Can it regain its entrepreneurial spirit and continue to thrive despite its mature culture? By turning to intrapreneurs, the company hopes it can have the best of both worlds.

So how does a company engage intrapreneurs? First, they need to be identified and acknowledged for their unique skill set. Provide them with an appropriate reward and recognition process, embrace their differences and develop the business culture to acknowledge those staff that are intrapreneurs. Challenge them, give them innovative and new business directions that need to be explored and managed as opportunities for the business. The secret is to give them freedom with appropriate responsibility and accountability to the business.

SUCCEEDING AT INTRAPRANEURSHIP – THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Every new idea will have more than its fair share of detractors, and there is no doubt that being an intrapreneur presents its own difficulties, even in the most tolerant of companies. But by following these Ten Commandments, intrapreneurs can succeed:

1. Do anything to move your idea forward – do any job needed to make your dream work, regardless of your job description.
2. Remember it is easier to ask for forgiveness than for permission.
3. Keep the best interests of the company and its customers in mind, especially when you have to bend the rules or circumvent the bureaucracy.
4. Ask for advice before you ask for resources.
5. Build your team; intrapreneurship is not a solo activity.
6. Share credit widely with your team and the company.
7. Come to work each day willing to be challenged and have the courage to do what’s right, rather than what you know.
8. Work underground for as long as you can. Find ways to hide the right new ideas from the corporate immune system in order to keep them alive. Too often the best ideas are prematurely exposed.
9. Be true to your goals, but be realistic about how to achieve them.
10. Honour and educate your sponsors. To keep the project alive, seek out managers whose advice you truly value, show them a ‘can-do’ creativity and the ability to follow through.
WHAT CAN SENIOR MANAGERS DO?

Let’s assume that you want to create an innovative, fast-moving organisation that takes the world by storm. You want process innovation, new products and services, continuous improvements and breakthroughs, new ways to sell old products and services, and to be stronger than your competitors. Your company can achieve these things by finding a way to direct and release the intrapreneurial spirit buried within your employees. Here are some simple steps that will open the doors for innovation and increase the level of discomfort with the status quo:

**Adopt a customer:** Spend time with your customers and talk to your suppliers. Create a vision or strategic intent that will engage and inspire your employees. It is difficult to give employees the freedom they need to be innovative without engaging them in an inspiring vision.

**Create a vision that stretches your organisation beyond ‘business as usual’:** A strategic intent that reaches beyond what seems possible with existing resources requires innovation and transformation, not just incremental improvements. It creates new freedoms and new responsibilities because it requires the creative energy of all employees.

**Ask for help:** Effective leaders admit that they don’t know it all, but they do know that they need the help and creativity of everyone in the organisation to discover new opportunities.

**Discover what is blocking innovation and handle it decisively:** Create an environment in which people at all levels can get on with the work of turning the vision into a reality. Promote only those who sponsor, rather than block, innovation.

**Search for and reward sponsors:** Sponsors are the critical link between top-line management and the innovators within the organisation. They select, nurture, guide, fund, educate, question and redirect innovators.

**State the type of innovation you want in your organisation:** And don’t change your mind before these breakthrough projects come to fruition! We have all witnessed many tragedies of interrupted innovation. Keep the system open to all kinds of innovation at all times – continual improvement, process breakthroughs, line extensions, new products and services, new ways of working together, new internal services and new organisational patterns.

**Flexibility and choice:** The essence of an innovative organisation is flexibility. To be able to build flexible systems that adapt to the challenges at hand, build choice into the lives of your employees. Allow them to exercise their freedom of choice – to spend 15 per cent of their time working on new ideas of their own choosing, and give them more choice over which projects they work on.

**Build community:** Building community spirit by creating visions of the future for the organisation will address people’s deepest values. Make the organisation stand for something that employees can be proud of – something that makes it worthwhile for them to rise above their self-interest and cheer for the whole.

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**Innovation and intrapreneurship in action**

Innovation begins with an attitude and a willingness to embrace the unknown; factors that are often difficult for an established business to reconcile. But when a company embraces innovation and evolves its traditional approaches, new channels of business that deliver new financial and business development opportunities happen. Mercedes-Benz is an example of one of the ‘oldest’ modern corporations in the world. It is recognised for its distinct brand and all that it stands for: embracing innovation and change, leading the world in technology, and extraordinary achievements. In staff development, change is being led by individuals who see the future of the business and who are implementing innovative management styles to engage and retain staff, and their successful innovations are then being taught.
to the rest of the business. An innovation culture has certainly been created within the company, across all areas of the business, including the business models, relationships and methods of using resources. The most recent example of this innovation in action is the new concept dealership, Mercedes-Benz Airport Express.

In February 2006, I accepted the opportunity to manage this exciting new initiative from Mercedes-Benz, it is a dealership concept that has not been seen anywhere in the world before. This innovation was first introduced by a fellow Mercedes-Benz staff member who raised the idea of having a unique Mercedes presence at major Australian airports, and over time our team has expanded on that idea to create an entire service and customer care centre concept. For a few thousand dollars, no more than the cost of a billboard, we could rent some extra space and create an entire terminal where time-poor customers could drop off their Mercedes-Benz for servicing while they are away, and use the Mercedes-Benz valet service to get to and from the domestic or international terminal of their choice. After brainstorming and researching the concept, we found that many luxury car owners are travelling more often, and the time was right for such a concept, so Mercedes-Benz Australia decided to give it a try.

Being presented with the opportunity to manage this exciting new dealership has allowed me to draw on my industry experience gained over the last 14 years. It has allowed the company to take a strategic approach to developing and implementing this concept using innovation and team members’ intrapreneurial flair to create a unique, boutique-style dealership which is setting new benchmarks and rewriting the rules for customer service excellence. We now have a business with a new car showroom which comes complete with valet transport to and from the international and domestic airport terminals, dry-cleaning drop off and collection, a gift store with quirky last-minute gifts, relaxation lounge, flight arrival/departure screens and several service bays to service and detail customers’ Mercedes-Benz while they are away. The managing director of Mercedes-Benz Australia says, “This is a good example of having an open and creative culture, where it is encouraged and rewarded to speak your mind…what’s more, it’s managed by the very staff member who originated many of the services offered by this concept.”